Georges Bataille
The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade
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The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade

(An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)

If I think it good to address this letter to my comrades, it is not because the propositions that it contains concern them. It will probably even appear to them that such propositions do not concern anyone in particular at all. But in this case I need to have at least a few people as witnesses to establish so complete a defection. There are, perhaps, declarations which, for lack of anything better, ridiculously need an Attic chorus, because they suppose, as their effect, in spite of everything, a minimum of astonishment, of misunderstanding, or of repugnance. But one does not address a chorus in order to convince it or rally it, and certainly one does not submit to the judgment of destiny without revolting, when it condemns the declarant to the saddest isolation.

This isolation, as far as I am concerned, is moreover in part voluntary, since I would agree to come out of it only on certain hard-to-meet conditions.

In fact even the gesture of writing, which alone permits one to envisage slightly less conventional human relations, a little less crafty than those of so-called intimate friendships—even this gesture of writing does not leave me with an appreciable hope. I doubt that it is possible to reach the few people to whom this letter is no doubt intended, over the heads of my present comrades. For—my resolution is all the more intransigent in that it is absurd to defend—it would have been necessary to deal not with individuals like those I already know, but only with men (and above all with masses) who are comparatively decomposed, amorphous, and even violently expelled from every form. But it is likely that such men do not yet exist (and the masses certainly do not exist).

All I can state is that, one day or another, they certainly will not fail to exist, given that current social bonds will inevitably be undone, and that these bonds cannot much longer maintain the habitual enslavement of people and customs. The masses will in turn be decomposed as soon as they see the prestige of industrial reality, to which they find themselves attached, disappear: in other words, when the process of material progress and rapid transformation in which they have had to participate (docile as well as in revolt) leads to a disagreeable and terminal stagnation.

My resolution thus cannot be defended only in that it eliminates—not without bitterness—every immediate satisfaction.

Outside of propositions that can only take on meaning through very general consequences, it so happens that it is high time for me to quell-at little cost—a part of this bitterness: it is possible at the very least to clear the narrow terrain—where from now on the debate will be carried out—of the intellectual bartering that usually goes on there. In fact it is obvious that if men incapable of histrionics succeed those of today, they will not be able to better represent the tacky phraseology

now in circulation than by recalling the fate reserved, by a certain number of writers, for the memory of D. A. F. de Sade (moreover it will, perhaps, appear fairly quickly, in a very general way, that the fact of needlessly resorting to literary or poetic verbiage, the inability to express oneself in a simple and categorical way, not only are the result of a vulgar impotence, but always betray a pretentious hypocrisy).

Of course, I do not allude in this way to the various people who are scandalized by the writings of Sade, but only to his most open apologists. It has seemed fitting today to place these writings (and with them the figure of their author) above everything (or almost everything) that can be opposed to them, but it is out of the question to allow them the least place in private or public life, in theory or in practice. The behavior of Sade's admirers resembles that of primitive subjects in relation to their king, whom they adore and loathe, and whom they cover with honors and narrowly confine. In the most favorable cases, the author of ***Justine*** is in fact thus treated as any given ***foreign body;*** in other words, he is only an object of transports of exaltation to the extent that these transports facilitate his excretion (his peremptory expulsion).

The life and works of D. A. F. de Sade would thus have no other use value than the common use value of excrement; in other words, for the most part, one most often only loves the rapid (and violent) pleasure of voiding this matter and no longer seeing it.

I am thus led to indicate how, in a way completely different from this usage, the sadism which is not ***completely different*** from that which existed before Sade appears positively, on the one hand, as an irruption of excremental forces (the excessive violation of modesty, positive algolagnia, the violent excretion of the sexual object coinciding with a powerful or tortured ejaculation, the libidinal interest in cadavers, vomiting, defecation…)—and on the other as a corresponding limitation, a narrow enslavement of everything that is opposed to this irruption. It is only in these concrete conditions that sad social necessity, human dignity, fatherland and family, as well as poetic sentiments, appear without a mask and without any play of light and shadow: it is finally impossible to see in those things anything other than subordinate forces: so many slaves working like cowards to prepare the beautiful blustering eruptions that alone are capable of answering the needs that torment the bowels of most men.

But, given that Sade revealed his conception of terrestrial life in the most outrageous form (even given that it is not possible to reveal immediately such a conception other than in a terrifying and inadmissible form), it is perhaps not surprising that people have believed it possible to get beyond its reach. Literary men apparently have the best reason for not confirming a brilliant verbal and low-cost apology through practice. They could even pretend that Sade was the first to take the trouble to situate the domain he described outside of and above all reality. They could easily affirm that the brilliant and suffocating value he wanted to give human existence is inconceivable outside of fiction,

that only poetry, exempt from all practical applications, permits one to have at his disposal, to a certain extent, the brilliance and suffocation that the Marquis de Sade tried so indecently to provoke.

It is right to recognize that, even practiced in the extremely implicit form it has retained up to this point, such a diversion discredits its authors (at the very least among those—even if, moreover, they are horrified by sadism—who refuse to become interested, for bad as well as for good reasons, in simple verbal prestidigitation).

The fact remains, unfortunately, that this diversion has been practiced for so long without denunciation, under cover of a fairly poor phraseology, simply because it takes place in an area where, it seems, everything slips away… It is no doubt almost useless at the present time to set forth rational propositions, since they could only be taken up for the profit of some convenient and—even in an apocalyptic guise—thoroughly literary enterprise: in other words, on the condition that they be useful for ambitions calculated by the impotence of present-day man. The slightest hope, in fact, involves the destruction (the disappearance) of a society that has so ridiculously allowed the one who conceives that hope to exist.

The time has no less come, it seems to me—under the indifferent eyes of my comrades—to bet on a future that has, it is true, only an unfortunate, hallucinatory existence. At the very least the plan I think possible to sketch ***intellectually*** today of what will really exist later is the only thing that links the various preliminary propositions that follow to a still sickly will to ***agitation***.

For the moment, an abrupt statement not followed by explanations seems to me to respond sufficiently to the intellectual disorientation of those who could have the opportunity to become aware of it. And (even though I am capable to a large extent of doing it now) I put off until later difficult and interminable explications, analogous to those of any other elaborated theory. At this point then I will set forth the propositions that, among other things, allow one to introduce the values established by the Marquis de Sade, obviously not in the domain of gratuitous impertinence, but rather directly in the very market in which, each day, the credit that individuals and even communities can give to their own lives is, in a way, registered.

Appropriation and Excretion

1. The division of social facts into religious facts (prohibitions, obligations and the realization of sacred action) on the one hand and profane facts (civil, political, juridical, industrial, and commercial organization) on the other, even though it is not easily applied to primitive societies and lends itself in general to a certain number of confusions, can nevertheless serve as the basis for the determination of two polarized human impulses: EXCRETION and APPROPRIATION. In other words. during a period in which the religious organization of a given country ***is developing***, this organization

represents the freest opening for excremental collective impulses (orgiastic impulses) established in opposition to political, juridical, and economic institutions.

2. Sexual activity, whether perverted or not; the behavior of one sex before the other; defecation; urination; death and the cult of cadavers (above all, insofar as it involves the stinking decomposition of bodies): the different taboos; ritual cannibalism; the sacrifice of animal-gods; omophagia; the laughter of exclusion; sobbing (which in general has death as its object); religious ecstasy; the identical attitude toward shit, gods, and cadavers; the terror that so often accompanies involuntary defecation; the custom of making women both brilliant and lubricious with makeup, gems, and gleaming jewels; gambling; heedless expenditure and certain fanciful uses of money, etc. together present a common character in that the object of the activity (excrement, shameful parts, cadavers, etc.) is found each time treated as a foreign body (***daz ganz Anderes***); in other words, it can just as well be expelled following a brutal rupture as reabsorbed through the desire to put one's body and mind entirely in a more or less violent state of expulsion (or projection). The notion of the (heterogeneous) foreign body permits one to note the elementary subjective identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous: a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud can be seen as characteristic of this unity.[1]

3. The process of simple appropriation is normally presented within the process of composite excretion, insofar as it is necessary for the production of an alternating rhythm, for example, in the following passage from Sade:

Verneuil makes someone shit, he eats the turd, and then he demands that someone eat his. The one who eats his shit vomits; he devours her puke.

The elementary form of appropriation is oral consumption, considered as communion (participation, identification, incorporation, or assimilation). Consumption is either sacramental (sacrificial) or not depending on whether the heterogeneous character of food is heightened or conventionally destroyed. In the latter case, the identification takes place first in the preparation of foods, which must be given an appearance of striking homogeneity, based on strict conventions. Eating as such then intervenes in the process as a complex phenomenon in that the very fact of swallowing presents itself as a partial rupture of physical equilibrium and is accompanied by, among other things, a sudden liberation of great quantities of saliva. Nevertheless, the element of appropriation, in moderate and rational form, in fact dominates, because cases in which eating's principal goal is physiological tumult (gluttony or drunkenness followed by vomiting) are no doubt unusual.

The process of appropriation is thus characterized by a homogeneity (static equilibrium) of the author of the appropriation, and of objects as final result, whereas excretion presents itself as the result of a heterogeneity, and can move in the direction of an ever greater heterogeneity, liberating impulses

whose ambivalence is more and more pronounced. The latter case is represented by, for example, sacrificial consumption in the elementary form of the orgy, which has no other goal than the incorporation in the person of irreducibly heterogeneous elements, insofar as such elements risk provoking an increase of force (or more exactly an increase of ***mana***).

4. Man does not only appropriate his food, but also the different products of his activity: clothes, furniture, dwellings, and instruments of production. Finally, he appropriates land divided into parcels. Such appropriations take place by means of a more or less conventional homogeneity (identity) established between the possessor and the object possessed. It involves sometimes a personal homogeneity that in primitive times could only be solemnly destroyed with the aid of an excretory rite, and sometimes a general homogeneity, such as that established by the architect between a city and its inhabitants.

In this respect, production can be seen as the excretory phase of a process of appropriation, and the same is true of selling.

5. The homogeneity of the kind realized in cities between men and that which surrounds them is only a subsidiary form of a much more consistent homogeneity, which man has established throughout the external world by everywhere replacing ***a priori*** inconceivable objects with classified series of conceptions or ideas. The identification of all the elements of which the world is composed has been pursued with a constant obstinacy, so that scientific conceptions, as well as the popular conceptions of the world, seem to have voluntarily led to a representation as different from what could have been imagined ***a priori*** as the public square of a capital is from a region of high mountains.

This last appropriation—the work of philosophy as well as of science or common sense—has included phases of revolt and scandal, but it has always had as its goal the establishment of the homogeneity of the world, and it will only be able to lead to a terminal phase in the sense of excretion when the irreducible waste products of the operation are determined.

Philosophy, Religion, and Poetry in Relation to Heterology

6. The interest of philosophy resides in the fact that, in opposition to science or common sense, it must positively envisage the waste products of intellectual appropriation. Nevertheless, it most often envisages these waste products only in abstract forms of totality (nothingness, infinity, the absolute), to which it itself cannot give a positive content; it can thus freely proceed in speculations that more or less have as a goal, all things considered, the ***sufficient*** identification of an endless world with a finite world, an unknowable (noumenal) world with the known (phenomena]) world.

Only an intellectual elaboration in a religious form can, in its periods of autonomous development, put forward the waste products of appropriative thought as the definitively heterogeneous (sacred)

object of speculation. But in general one must take into account the fact that religions bring about a profound separation within the sacred domain, dividing it into a superior world (celestial and divine) and an inferior world (demoniacal, a world of decomposition); now such a division necessarily leads to a progressive homogeneity of the entire superior domain (only the inferior domain resists all efforts at appropriation). God rapidly and almost entirely loses his terrifying features, his appearance as a decomposing cadaver, in order to become, at the final stage of degradation, the simple (paternal) sign of universal homogeneity.

7. In practice, one must understand by religion not really that which answers the need for the unlimited projection (expulsion or excretion) of human nature, but the totality of prohibitions, obligations, and partial freedom that socially channel and regularize this projection. Religion thus differs from a practical and theoretical ***heterology***[2] (even though both are equally concerned with sacred or excremental facts), not only in that the former excludes the scientific rigor proper to the latter (which generally appears as different from religion as chemistry is from alchemy), but also in that, under normal conditions, it betrays the need that it was not only supposed to regulate, but satisfy.

8. Poetry at first glance seems to remain valuable as a method of mental projection (in that it permits one to accede to an entirely heterogeneous world). But it is only too easy to see that it is hardly less debased than religion. It has almost always been at the mercy of the great historical systems of appropriation. And insofar as it can be developed autonomously, this autonomy leads it onto the path of a total poetic conception of the world, which ends at any one of a number of aesthetic homogeneities. The practical unreality of the heterogeneous elements it sets in motion is, in fact, an indispensable condition for the continuation of heterogeneity: starting from the moment when this unreality immediately constitutes itself as a superior reality, whose mission is to eliminate (or degrade) inferior vulgar reality, poetry is reduced to playing the role of the standard of things, and, in opposition, the worst vulgarity takes on an ever stronger excremental value.

The Heterological Theory of Knowledge

9. When one says that heterology scientifically considers questions of heterogeneity, one does not mean that heterology is, in the usual sense of such a formula, the science of the heterogeneous. The heterogeneous is even resolutely placed outside the reach of scientific knowledge, which by definition is only applicable to homogeneous elements. Above all, heterology is opposed to any homogeneous representation of the world, in other words, to any philosophical system. The goal of such representations is always the deprivation of our universe's sources of excitation and the development of a servile human species, fit only for the fabrication, rational consumption, and conservation of products. But the intellectual process automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental

element. Heterology is restricted to taking up again, consciously and resolutely, this terminal process which up until now has been seen as the abortion and the shame of human thought.

In that way it [heterology] leads to the complete reversal of the philosophical process, which ceases to be the instrument of appropriation, and now serves excretion; it introduces the demand for the violent gratifications implied by social life.

10. Only, on the one hand, the process of limitation and, on the other, the study of the violently alternating reactions of antagonism (expulsion) and love (reabsorption) obtained by positing the heterogeneous element, lie within the province of heterology as science. This element itself remains indefinable and can only be determined through negation. The specific character of fecal matter or of the specter, as well as of unlimited time or space, can only be the object of a series of negations, such as the absence of any possible common denominator, irrationality, etc. It must even be added that there is no way of placing such elements in the immediate objective human domain, in the sense that the pure and simple objectification of their specific character would lead to their incorporation in a homogeneous intellectual system, in other words, to a hypocritical cancellation of their excremental character.

The objectivity of heterogeneous elements thus is of only purely theoretical interest, since one can only attain it on the condition that one envisage ***waste products*** in the total form of the infinite obtained by negation (in other words, objective heterogeneity's shortcoming is that it can only be envisaged in an abstract form, whereas the subjective heterogeneity of particular elements is, in practice, alone concrete).

11. Scientific data—in other words, the result of appropriation—alone retains an immediate and appreciable objective character, since immediate objectivity is defined by the possibilities of intellectual appropriation. If one defines real exterior objects it is necessary to introduce at the same time the possibility of a relation of scientific appropriation. And if such a relation is impossible, the element envisaged remains in practice unreal, and can only abstractly be made objective. All questions posed beyond this represent the persistence of a dominant need for appropriation, the sickly obstinacy of a will seeking to represent, in spite of everything, and through simple cowardice, a homogeneous and servile world.

12. It is useless to try to deny that one finds there—much more than in the difficulty (less embarrassing than facility) met with in the analysis of the process of excretion and appropriation—the weak point (in practice) of these conceptions, for one must generally take into account the unconscious obstinacy furnished by defections and complacency. It would be too easy to find in objective nature a large number of phenomena that in a crude way correspond to the human model of excretion and appropriation, in order to attain once again the notion of the unity of being, for example, in a dialectical form. One can attain it more generally through animals, plants, matter,

nature, and being, without meeting really consistent obstacles. Nevertheless, it can already be indicated that as one moves away from man, the opposition loses its importance to the point where it is only a superimposed form that one obviously could not have discovered in the facts considered if it had not been borrowed from a different order of facts. The only wav to resist this dilution lies in the practical part of heterology, which leads to an action that resolutely goes against this regression to homogeneous nature.

As soon as the effort at rational comprehension ends in contradiction, the practice of intellectual scatology requires the excretion of unassimilable elements, which is another way of stating vulgarly that a burst of laughter is the only imaginable and definitively terminal result—and not the means—of philosophical speculation. And then one must indicate that a reaction as insignificant as a burst of laughter derives from the extremely vague and distant character of the intellectual domain, and that it suffices to go from a speculation resting on abstract facts to a practice whose mechanism is not different, but which immediately reaches concrete heterogeneity, in order to arrive at ecstatic trances and orgasm.

Principles of Practical Heterology

13. Excretion is not simply a middle term between two appropriations, just as decay is not simply a middle term between the grain and the ear of wheat. The inability to consider in this latter case decay as an end in itself is the result not precisely of the human viewpoint but of the specifically intellectual viewpoint (to the extent that this viewpoint is in practice subordinate to a process of appropriation). The human viewpoint, independent of official declarations, in other words as it results from, among other things, the analysis of dreams, on the contrary represents appropriation as a means of excretion. In the final analysis it is clear that a worker works in order to obtain the violent pleasures of coitus (in other words. he accumulates in order to spend). On the other hand. the conception according to which the worker must have coitus in order to provide for the future necessities of work is linked to the unconscious identification of the worker with the slave. In fact, to the extent that the various functions are distributed among the various social categories, appropriation in its most overwhelming form historically devolves on slaves: thus in the past serfs had to accumulate products for knights and clerks, who barely took part in the labor of appropriation, and then only through the establishment of a morality that regularized for their own profit the circulation of goods. But as soon as one attacks the accursed exploitation of man by man, it becomes time to leave to the exploiters this abominable appropriative morality, which for such a long time has permitted their own orgies of wealth. To the extent that man no longer thinks of crushing his comrades under the yoke of morality, he acquires the capacity to link overtly not only his intellect and his virtue but his ***raison d'être*** to the violence and incongruity of his excretory organs, as well as to his ability to become excited and entranced by heterogeneous elements, commonly starting in debauchery.

14. The need—before being able to go on to radical demands and to the violent practice of a rigorous moral liberty—to abolish all exploitation of man by man is not the only motive that links the practical development of heterology to the overturning of the established order.

In that they are manifested in a social milieu, the urges that heterology identifies ***in practice*** with the ***raison d'être*** of man can be seen in a certain sense as antisocial (to the same degree that sexual corruption or even pleasure is seen by certain individuals as a waste of strength, like, for example, the great ritual destructions of goods in British Columbia, or, among civilized peoples, the pleasure of crowds watching great fires at night). Nevertheless, the impulses that go against the interests of a society in a state of stagnation (during a phase of appropriation) have, on the contrary, social revolution (the phase of excretion) as their end: thus they can find, through the historical movements by means of which humanity spends its own strength freely and limitlessly, both total gratification and use in the very sense of general conscious benefit. Besides, whatever the reality of this ulterior benefit might be, it is no less true that if one considers the submerged masses, doomed to an obscure and impotent life, the revolution by which these masses liberate force with a long-restrained violence is as much the practical ***raison d'être*** of societies as it is their means of development.

15. Of course the term ***excretion*** applied to the Revolution must first he understood in the strictly mechanical—and moreover etymological—sense of the word. The first phase of a revolution is separation, in other words, a process leading to the position of two groups of forces, each one characterized by the necessity of excluding the other. The second phase is the violent expulsion of the group that has possessed power by the revolutionary group.

But one also notes that each of the groups, by its very constitution, gives the opposing group an almost exclusively negative excremental character, and it is only because of this negativity that the sacrificial character of a revolution remains profoundly unconscious. The revolutionary impulse of the proletarian masses is, moreover, sometimes implicitly and sometimes openly treated as sacred, and that is why it is possible to use the word ***Revolution*** entirely stripped of its utilitarian meaning without, however, giving it an idealist meaning.

16. Participation—in the purely psychological sense as well as in the active sense of the word—does not only commit revolutionaries to a particular politics, for example, to the establishment of socialism throughout the world. It is also—and necessarily—presented as moral participation: immediate participation in the destructive action of the revolution (expulsion realized through the total shattering of the equilibrium of the social edifice), indirect participation in all equivalent destructive action. It is the very character of the revolutionary will to link such actions—not, as in the Christian apocalypse, to punishment—but to the enjoyment or the utility of human beings, and it is obvious that all destruction that is neither useful nor inevitable can only be the achievement of an exploiter and, consequently, of morality as the principle of all exploitation.[3] But then it is easy to ascertain that the reality of such

participation is at the very basis of the separation of the socialist parties, divided into reformists and revolutionaries.

Without a profound complicity with natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them, terrifying ruptures of what had seemed to be immutable, the fall into stinking filth of what had been elevated—without a sadistic understanding of an incontestably thundering and torrential nature, there could be no revolutionaries, there could only be a revolting utopian sentimentality.

17. The ***participation*** in everything that, among men, is horrible and allegedly sacred can take place in a limited and unconscious form, but this limitation and this unconsciousness obviously have only a provisional value, and nothing can stop the movement that leads human beings toward an ever more shameless awareness of the erotic bond that links them to death, to cadavers, and to horrible physical pain. It is high time that human nature cease being subjected to the autocrat's vile repression and to the morality that authorizes exploitation. Since it is true that one of a man's attributes is the derivation of pleasure from the suffering of others, and that erotic pleasure is not only the negation of an agony that takes place at the same instant, but also a lubricious participation in that agony, it is time to choose between the conduct of cowards afraid of their own joyful excesses, and the conduct of those who judge that any given man need not cower like a hunted animal, but instead can see all the moralistic buffoons as so many dogs.

18. As a result of these elementary considerations, it is necessary from now on to envisage two distinct phases in human emancipation, as undertaken successively by the different revolutionary surges, from Jacobinism to bolshevism.

During the revolutionary phase, the current phase that will only end with the world triumph of socialism, only the social Revolution can serve as an outlet for collective impulses, and no other activity can be envisaged in practice.

But the postrevolutionary phase implies the necessity of a division between the economic and political organization of society on one hand, and on the other, an antireligious and asocial organization having as its goal orgiastic participation in different forms of destruction, in other words, the collective satisfaction of needs that correspond to the necessity of provoking the violent excitation that results from the expulsion of heterogeneous elements.

Such an organization can have no other conception of morality than the one scandalously affirmed for the first time by the Marquis de Sade.

19. When it is a question of the means of realizing this orgiastic participation, [such] an organization will find itself as close to religions anterior ***to the formations of autocratic States*** as it is distant from religions such as Christianity or Buddhism.

One must broadly take into account, in such a forecast, the probable intervention of blacks in the general culture. To the extent that blacks participate in revolutionary emancipation, the attainment of socialism will bring them the possibility of all kinds of exchanges with white people, but in conditions radically different from those currently experienced by the civilized blacks of America. Now black communities, once liberated front all superstition as from all oppression, represent in relation to heterology not only the possibility but the necessity of an adequate organization. All organizations that have ecstasy and frenzy as their goal (the spectacular death of animals, partial tortures, orgiastic dances, etc.) will have no reason to disappear when a heterological conception of human life is substituted for the primitive conception; they can only transform themselves while they spread, under the violent impetus of a moral doctrine of white origin, taught to blacks by all those whites who have become aware of the abominable inhibitions paralyzing their race's communities. It is only starting from this collusion of European scientific theory with black practice that institutions can develop which will serve as the final outlets (with no other limitations than those of human strength) for the urges that today require worldwide society’s fiery and bloody Revolution.

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[1] The identical nature, from the psychological point of view, of God and excrement shout not shock the intellect of anyone familiar with the problems posed by the history of religions. The cadaver is not much more repugnant thin shit, and the spectator that projects its horror is ***sacred*** even in the eyes of modern theologians. The following passage from Frazer very nearly sums up the basic historical aspect of the question: “…These different categories of people differ, in our eyes, by virtue of their character and their condition: we should say that one group is sacred, the other filthy or impure. This is not the case for the savage, for his mind is much too crude to understand what a sacred being is, and what an impure being is."

[2] The science of what is completely other. The term ***agiology*** would perhaps be more precise but one would have to catch the double meaning of ***agio*** (analogous to the double meaning of ***sacer***), ***soiled*** as well as ***holy***. But it is above all the term scatology (the science of excrement) that retains in the present circumstances (the specialization of the sacred) an incontestable expressive value a the doublet of an abstract term such as ***heterology***.

[3] For example, imperialist war.